



REVIEWS

Carolyn Korsmeyer. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-975694-0

‘There is only one kind of ugliness,’ Kant claims, ‘that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses disgust.’¹ In her new book, Carolyn Korsmeyer presents a quick and convincing reply to Kant’s exclusion of disgust from art: not only is disgust actually prompted by certain works of art, she argues, but it has a potential to excite a unique aesthetic experience equal in impact and importance to an experience of the sublime. *Savoring Disgust*, however, is far more than an exploration of the emotion of disgust in philosophy and art. It makes a case against any general response to the paradox of negative emotions in art, and suggests that the debate shifts onto a more particularistic ground seeking solutions for individual emotions and emphasizing their uniqueness; a close study of disgust thus being an example of what such an approach can bring. And finally, Korsmeyer’s book further develops the argument she has presented in her former work – namely, that there is something fundamentally wrong with aesthetics based on sheer pleasure.

Korsmeyer argues that disgust belongs among aesthetic emotions, that is, emotions without which one could not fully appreciate certain works of art. Her key point is that the emotion of disgust has many important roles to play in art and a substantial part of the book concerns exploring their variety. To illustrate the variety she offers many examples ranging from the visual to the literary arts, including interpretations of such works as Jenny Saville’s painting *Host*, one episode of *The X-Files*, or Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. This helps Korsmeyer to make her points in a particularly enlightening way. Overall, the book is excellently organized: each chapter can stand on its own and, at the same time, the argumentative line has a clear direction from the first to the last page. Instead of closely following that line, however, I should like to focus here on aspects that I found somewhat problematic.

But first a brief overview of the book’s contents. In the first of its seven chapters, Korsmeyer reviews a few psychological and philosophical theories of emotions and locates disgust in their scope. In the second chapter, she explores the charges that have been brought against disgust in art. One of these – that objects of

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), § 48, 180.



disgust are not worthy of any extended attention – is rebutted in the third chapter, where Korsmeyer follows disgust into the realm of cuisine, showing how much – and in how many ways – the disgusting can be savoured. The vindication of ‘aesthetic disgust’ against its deniers, mostly Enlightenment philosophers, continues in the fourth chapter, where Korsmeyer provides a rich list of examples of disgusting works of art. In the course of the fifth chapter, important concepts of pleasure and cognition are elucidated; Korsmeyer suggests that aesthetic pleasure is recast as intense absorption in an object. The motivation for such absorption is expected cognition or insight whose contents with respect to disgusting works of art she considers also in the sixth chapter. The concluding chapter concerns the relationship between disgust and beauty.

In her survey of emotion theories (cognitivist as well as noncognitivist accounts of emotions are under scrutiny), Korsmeyer does not clearly subscribe to any of them. Instead she uses them in an eclectic way, showing and combining various elements of, and perspectives on, emotions. There are three aspects of emotions, however, that Korsmeyer emphasizes above all. First, emotions have a certain intentionality, and, second, they have a characteristic physiology. As to the former aspect, she states that disgust is directed to the rotten and the foul; as to the latter, disgust induces a characteristic strong visceral reaction, prototypically a certain facial expression, involuntary recoil, nausea, and so forth. Her third claim – whose importance is appreciated with regard to the aesthetic variety of emotion – is that affective events, no matter how immediate and reactive they are, always afford an opportunity for reflection, if only ‘on the fact that they have occurred at all’ (p. 120). More often, however, they are means of insight; they register important facts, which can come before the mind of a subject in the ‘reflective aftermath of the emotion’ (ibid.).

To enlarge upon the intentionality of disgust, she refers to studies by Paul Rozin, William Miller, and, above all, Aurel Kolnai whose essay ‘Der Ekel’ (1929) Korsmeyer helped to publish in English for the first time.² She notes that they offer partly overlapping lists of disgusting objects – the fundamental ‘disgust elicitors’, as she calls them – that include contaminated foods, bodily products such as dirt, vomit, or excrement, lower-order animals, especially those in swarms, violations of the bodily envelope, exaggerated fecundity, signs of death and decay. In accord with Kolnai, she emphasizes that disgust is directed to sensory qualities of these things – their foul odour, terrible taste, filthy appearance. Korsmeyer describes disgust as ‘transparent’ for ‘it commands attention to the presentation to the senses, regardless of its mode of existence’ (p. 47). It is because of the transparency, she

² Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

claims, that 'even in artistic contexts disgust retains its signature physical arousal' (p. 48). She also quotes the authors' elucidation of the basic reason that connects various disgust elicitors – a fear of contamination, a reminder of our animal nature, or a signifier of death.

Korsmeyer uses the two elements – that is, the typical elicitors of disgust and characteristic behaviour – to individuate the emotion of disgust. Thus when she focuses on artworks eliciting disgust, the presence of a disgusting object or its 'particular visceral queasiness' (p. 91) or both suffices to call the affective response of the recipient 'disgust'. For example, readers of John Donne's witty poem 'The Flea' are doubtless disgusted because fleas 'are pretty good examples of disgusting objects' (p. 174). Disgusting works of art are thus identified quite rigidly, usually by their topics – a strategy that I found rather prescriptive and phenomenologically not very illuminating.

Here, Korsmeyer is parting from the hard-line cognitive theory of emotions, according to which emotions are distinguished by different beliefs. William Lyons, among others, has convincingly argued: 'behavior and feelings need not be present on all occasions of an emotional state, but, even when they are present, they do not form any sufficiently consistent and distinct patterns which would enable one to distinguish different emotions by reference to such patterns'³ and 'emotions are not specified by their objects or targets but by what the subject of the emotion *thinks* of the object or target'.⁴ The same object can provoke love, embarrassment, and fear, depending on how the subject interprets it.

I hasten to add, however, that Korsmeyer's emphasis on an object and physiology stems from her interest in the emotion of disgust. She by no means offers a general theory of emotions. (I suspect she would not even consider that to be a feasible enterprise.) The belief may therefore play a pivotal role in a definition of some emotions but it is not central to disgust. A strong and immediate reaction that is characteristic of disgust is a feature that the classical cognitive theory of emotions finds hard to accommodate and it thus does not provide a suitable background for the discussion that Korsmeyer wants to pursue. Korsmeyer here adds her voice to those who think that cognitivism does not represent a satisfactory general theory of emotions – a point that has been elaborated, for example, by Jenefer Robinson, with respect to 'the "reflex" reaction of startle'.⁵ And indeed, it is a reaction which Korsmeyer compares disgust with when she wants to emphasize the latter's reflexive character.

³ William Lyons, *Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵ Jenefer Robinson, 'Startle', *Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995): 53–74. See also Jinehee Choi, 'Fits and Startles: Cognitivism Revisited', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 149n2.

Cognitivists' answer to the counterexample of the startle response was to exclude it from the rubric of emotion because it 'seems fixed and rigid in comparison to emotions and once elicited it seems to run its course'.⁶ Similarly, Edward B. Royzman and John Sabini recently claimed that disgust should not be categorized as an emotion at all. Whereas emotions have, characteristically, abstract elicitors (fear, for example, is elicited by anything that *I believe* to be dangerous) and provoke flexible responses, disgust comprises 'a set of fixed reactions associated with concrete elicitors'.⁷ 'There is no distinct cognition (e.g. "I am about to be contaminated." "I am an animal.") constitutive of disgust – there is no belief a person must have to be rightly said to be experiencing a case of disgust'.⁸ Disgust, they argue, belongs among drives or reflexes rather than among emotions properly so called. Although one need not of course draw the same conclusion as the authors (and may claim instead that there are two types of emotion), the difference between concrete and abstract elicitors is worth noting; while the former can do without a subject's belief, the latter requires an interpretation.

This discussion is instructive because Korsmeyer seems to understand disgust both as a hard-wired reaction to certain cues, specific sensory properties (and thus, in Royzman and Sabini's terminology, as a drive) as well as an emotion inspired by what one believes to be true about the world, for example, that I might be infected, reminded of my animal nature and my corporeality destined to decay. As she states: 'the intentional direction of the emotion [of disgust] is usually toward literal objects rather than propositions – a terrible taste or a foul odor, a lump of decomposing flesh, a squirming nest of maggots – though the intention easily spreads propositionally to the idea that the object may come too close and contaminate one' (p. 30). It thus seems that there are two general kinds of disgust: one that is triggered automatically by sensory properties of an object and the other that is elicited by whatever one believes to be disgusting. What is the relationship between these two types of disgust – if Korsmeyer endorses such a view at all – is not discussed in the book.

Why this distinction matters becomes evident when one considers Korsmeyer's elegant – but perhaps too hasty – resolution of the paradox of fiction. According to the paradox, emotions aroused by fiction are puzzling because we do not hold an appropriate belief about their objects, and thus grieve over the death of someone who, as we know, neither died nor lived, or we are afraid of something

⁶ Richard S. Lazarus, 'On the Primacy of Cognition', *American Psychologist* 39 (1984): 125.

⁷ Edward B. Royzman and John Sabini, 'Something It Takes to Be an Emotion: The Interesting Case of Disgust', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 31 (2001): 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56n3.

that does not, as we know, pose any threat to us. Korsmeyer points out that the puzzle does not concern disgust – the fictional status of an object does not make it any less disgusting. 'We are really disgusted even when we know the intentional object of disgust is a fiction. [...] So dependent is disgust on its sensory elicitors that it is easily triggered, bypassing the paradox of fiction.' (p. 56) This does not, however, cover those variants of disgust that are elicited by what one believes to be true about their objects.

If Korsmeyer initially focuses on reactive, drive-like kinds of disgust, it is because these are the ones that seem most implausible to square with (aesthetic) liking. And the most difficult case among these appears to be disgust provoked by food, for it seems just a commonplace that one does not voluntarily eat something disgusting. Korsmeyer, however, claims that we do eat and enjoy eating the disgusting more often than we would expect. She argues her case at two levels: first, there are plenty of highly appreciated meals, whose sensory properties belong to the category of primary disgust elicitors, such as food with repulsive odour and urinary taste (including Roquefort cheese or kidneys prepared according to a recipe by Alexandre Dumas); second, there are also many foods that are disgusting because of what they signify. With regard to the latter, Korsmeyer brings in highly interesting examples of meals that 'seem deliberately to harbor an awareness of the fact that to sustain one's own life one takes another' (p. 78) – an awareness that a reflective eater can appreciate and even enjoy.

Korsmeyer claims that once the disgusting turns into the savoured, it loses its initial repulsiveness and becomes pleasurable; culinary experiments are tied by the limits of physical tolerance. It then seems somewhat questionable if that does not exclude it from the category of the disgusting. Korsmeyer acknowledges this difficulty, but argues: 'there is still sufficient likeness between Roquefort and vomit that the innocent person opening the fridge [...] might recoil at the impression that something has badly spoiled' (p. 65). This argument, however, seems hard to square with her own remark (made immediately afterwards) that it is a mistake to think that 'sensory properties are severable from properties of something. [...] Different interpretations of the object of taste or smell yield different sense experience.' (ibid.) How then – from which point of view – can one find Roquefort and vomit comparable? The concept of sufficient likeness needs more elucidation and should rather make do without the innocent person.

Leaving this difficulty aside, how does 'reflective eating' (p. 84), that is, a food experience that incorporates the recognition of an eater's own 'participation in a death dealing activity' (p. 82), and thus, ultimately, her own mortality, relate to pleasure? Or do we appreciate difficult tastes only intellectually, without a real gustatory satisfaction? What kinds of values do we seek eating anyway? In one

of the first articles that Korsmeyer published, she argues: 'the arts of the taste and the smell aim, and indeed must aim, at pleasing – at immediate, sensuous gratification'.⁹ Although she still thinks that the value of the food experience is to be understood in terms of pleasure, the pleasures it affords no longer comprise solely 'immediate, sensuous gratification'; the term needs to accommodate intellectual satisfaction as well. 'Our pleasure responses to tastes themselves can be complex cognitive responses that sometimes involve highly compressed symbolic recognition' (p. 69), she argues here (as well as in her famous *Making Sense of Taste*). The term 'pleasure' undertakes a more thorough revision later in the book, where Korsmeyer takes issue with a view that understands pleasure as a sensation. She suggests to interpret pleasure as a 'modifier of attention, intensifying for a host of reasons some experience that the participant would rather have continue than not' (p. 118). Even though I fully endorse her criticism, I have not been able to understand why Korsmeyer insists on preservation of the term 'pleasure' at all.

My misgivings about the definition of disgust and other minor matters mentioned above are outweighed by her work at a lower level of abstraction. Korsmeyer is at her best when she explores various meanings of the disgusting in art, emphasizing how singular and context-dependent they are; the most interesting passages almost border on art criticism. The persuasiveness of the book thus lies in the details. They make this book on this disgusting delectable.

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⁹ Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, 'On the "Aesthetic Senses" and the Development of Fine Arts', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1975): 70.